

Zimring, Carl A.

Cash for your trash: Scrap recycling in America

Antonio de Pádua Bosi*

New Brunswick (NJ): Rutgers University Press, 2009. 221p.

Published in 2009, *Cash for your trash* was originally written in 2002 as a doctoral dissertation in history in Carnegie Mellon University (Pennsylvania, USA). Although it was one of the first specialized studies about the recycling of scrap in the United State, it includes sources and reflections which allow some changes in social practices to be traced from the nineteenth century onwards, related to waste and the reuse of all types of discarded materials. The final aspects is the most relevant aspect of the book.

Initially Carl Zimring proposes a difficult problem: what is the significance of recycling? Using a rudimentary historical scale he says that this activity is very old, and finds records going back to the eight and seventh centuries B.C., Isaiah and Micah prophesized that God would convert the peoples so that “they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks” (Zimring, 2009, p.13). The following evidence points to medieval Europe in the twelfth century and paper production techniques using rags. From here he advances quickly to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, identifying the presence of an incipient market for the sale and purchase of rags and scrap iron, the result of which had a strong economic impact in the twentieth century, becoming an important, profitable and monopolized venture:

Dealing with trash became big business in the 1990s. Various cities privatized their trash collection and processing systems, establishing contracts with giant companies which started to give a destiny to society’s waste. Private companies had had contracts with cities for decades, but where there had operated ten or twenty thousand companies, there came to be only four national corporations which now dominate this market. (Zimring, 2009, p.155, our translation)

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From the author's perspective, human survival based on garbage emerged as an alternative for poor people without a repertoire to enter the labor market. Based on the study of the sociologist Stewart Perry (1998), his description of this activity indicated a type of work that was "dirty, dangerous, and of low status." Initially it was an activity restricted to poor European immigrants, principally Italians with little command of English. The distrust of these immigrants was linked to a negative perception of how to deal with the garbage of others, producing a generalized sensibility that this activity was really dirty and repulsive – the fundamental reason for the lack of prestige which marked the men and women who worked in this area. Not even when scrap was transformed into a merchandise and came to be seen as an advantageous business, did the status of those who lived from this trade change.

Zimring confirms that since the nineteenth century various materials were systematically collected and traded in many cities. Rubber, rags, bottles, tin, iron, steel and even bones (transformed into fertilizers) formed the income of many workers who, at the service of merchants (acting as the wholesalers of these goods), crossed urban centers in carts collecting or buying these surpluses. However, his reflections and the sources researched in this area do not surpass Susan Strasser's (2000) contribution about the reality of the people who lived from this activity until the first half of the twentieth century.

Zimring's attention is predominantly focused on the trade of discarded materials and sensitivity to waste. Looking at the question of the trade of recyclable materials the author offers a statistical portrait of the conversion of garbage into a business. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the growth of transactions involving scrap in the United States (especially iron and steel) was quite visible. In 1884, 733,000 tons of iron and steel were imported in that country, a figure which jumped to almost two million tons in 1887. This growth became evident in the first decades of the nineteenth century when the state taxed this type of import and arbitrated a classification system in order to stipulate the quality of material traded. However, the trade of recycled materials, which continually increased in the nineteenth century, was not motivated by any type of concern centered on waste or hygiene.

For Zimring the concern with the preservation of the environment emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century (particularly forests and natural resources threatened by industrial society and consumption) was associated with the business strategy of the *National Association of Waste Material Dealers* (NAWMD). The use of preservationist sentiment (apparently disseminated in the United States since the beginning of the nineteenth

century) to legitimate the business of recycling materials became a recurrent advertising practice and a powerful political argument to recognize and valorize the social function of businessmen in this sector. Zimring identifies how these businessmen began to express this vision in 1913, when NAWMD was created. That year its president tried to affirm the social function of his peers and members saying that “waste traders are the true preservationists. They have managed to get millions of dollars out of garbage.” (Zimring, 2009, p.73). However, although the reference to the preservationist sentiment was clear to some of the scrap traders, this did not happen with the population or the state. Public programs to encourage recycling only appeared in the 1940s due to the need to supply metal and rubber to industry during the war. The principal slogan of the government echoed the effects of Pearl Harbor rather than an environmental concern: “collect scrap to explode the Japanese!”

The spread of recycling appears to have been stimulated by the state, which certainly strengthened scrap traders. Initially this was done without using environmental arguments. The first large state intervention occurred due to the war effort which involved the reuse of materials in the armaments industry. In relation to this, Zimring identifies the emergence of systematic government propaganda which sought to mobilize the population to collect items such as metal and rubber. However, it was a precisely dated effort, because the end of the Second World War also brought to an end the moral recycling crusade. The state would only encourage recycling again a decade later, pressurized by the result of unprecedented consumerism in the United States.

In relation to this Zimring highlights what an abundant literature has already shown, that during the 1940s and 1950s American were encouraged to consume on a growing scale in order to convert this behavior into a routinized social practice and exponentially polluting. The rapid discarding of ‘precociously’ aged goods became a new and surprising social phenomenon. In 1951 alone, approximately 25,000 discarded automobiles were scattered in various ‘cemeteries’ throughout the country. This number rose to eight million during the 1960s. This scenario appears to have justified a new effort to collect and reuse this scrap, appealing to a new hygienist perspective focused on cleanliness and the aestheticization of roadsides and urban lands which were frightening due to the amount of rubble, especially automobile carcasses.

Zimring also points out that various governments invested in this sentiment during the 1960s and 1970s, developing an institutional apparatus which sought to regulate the areas where scrap could be left, without however guaranteeing or facilitating means for the reuse of this material. The technological

innovations which allowed the separation and transformation of iron, steel, rubber, and plastic, for example, presented other rhythms, and their use logically depended on being shown to be cheaper than the production of these items *in natura*.

The book becomes more interesting as it gets closer to the present and starts to look at the connection between recycling and environmentalism (dating and explaining the emergence of these two ethics), showing, albeit briefly, that in this way it favored the creation of a powerful recycling industry. Furthermore, the approach adopted by Zimring suggests and encourages a perspective of this question in which the writing of the historian assumes the strength of a political intervention, since the author continues some of his reflections to the present day. However, it is also the shortest and least explored part of the book, remaining as a challenge for future studies. His vision of the way the perception became generalized that “recycling is ecologically correct” is rather imprecise. On the one hand, this inaccuracy is due to the fact that it is a recent question, with still unfinished developments. On the other hand, the author’s probing of the problem is not profound because to a large extent he handles a timid volume of primary and secondary sources. However, this should not be considered a defect of the book, since, as I observed, the final chapter suggests important challenges for historical research, and also for this reason, it deserves to be read.

A final word about the importance of the sources in relation to the historic object which the author proposed to discuss. His research gathered a large set of primary and secondary sources, indicated in the book, which still can and should be investigated by researchers who are interested in the theme. This can still be clearly visualized in relation to the hypothesis he presents about the change in the sensitivity towards garbage, waste, and the practice of reuse. Since his reflections are based in the United States, we should keep open the investigation about the historic trajectory of the relationship with garbage – and with the production of garbage – constructed in different places. Applying this approach to Latin American countries will surely expand our understanding of the social values and practices linked to the man-nature relationship, currently much in vogue. It is always worth remembering that below the equator recycling is a historic event which involves tens of thousands of people who live from garbage.

Finally, Carl Zimring’s contribution to this theme has been enriched by his reflections which began in *Cash for your trash*. This is the case of *The Complex Environmental Legacy of the Automobile Shredder*, from 2011, and

The Encyclopedia of Consumption and Waste: The Social Science of Garbage, from 2012, where Zimring expands his discussion about recent garbage production technology and its impact on the environment. This production benefits from his intellectual trajectory, marked by his academic formation which is centered on history, but is also interdisciplinary. His teaching activities, for example, unlike the Brazilian case which requires involvement with the hard core of history, is characterized by the teaching of interdisciplinary content linked, above all, to the theme of History and the Environment. In summary, historians and other interested intellectual will certainly not be disappointed with these readings.

REFERENCES

- PERRY, Stewart E. *Collecting Garbage: dirty work, clean jobs, proud people*. New Brunswick (NJ): Transaction Publishers, 1998.
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